



First United Church of Oak Park

Another Prophetic Perspective

Isaiah 40: 1-8

The Rev. John Edgerton

November 28, 2021

The reading we just heard is a real hard left turn from the four chapters that came before. What came before was prose; this is poetry. What came before is history; this is prophecy. What came before overall was a retelling of the court intrigue that occurred during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah in his attempts to remain independent of Emperor Sennacherib of the Assyrian empire. How to remain independent of Assyria is, in fact, the backdrop of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah. The prophet promises that so long as the people remain separate and distinct — not succumbing to the wicked ways of the Assyrian empire, not worshiping their many idols but worshiping God alone — then a righteous king will protect them, so long as the people are faithful. Faithfulness for national security.

As I said, that is the first 39 chapters of Isaiah. Chapter 40, though, takes a hard left turn. For one thing, the Assyrian empire is but a memory. Hundreds of years have passed with no warning. We had been in the height of Assyria's power, but in Chapter 40 we've jumped over Assyria being conquered by Babylon, jumped over Babylon conquering Judah and exiling the people of God, jumped over practically the entire Babylonian empire, in fact. Because Chapter 40 takes up a prophecy about King Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus who would allow the exiles to return home, Cyrus who would conquer Babylon. The historical perspective has changed.

This is one way we know that what we call the Book of Isaiah has at least two different authors, who lived at very different times. Just as we have First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, First and Second Corinthians, so, too, do we have First and Second Isaiah.

It's not just the historical perspective that has changed, however. The prophetic perspective has changed as well. That is, what the prophet is calling for the people to do has changed. First Isaiah had a clear perspective — a righteous king will protect them, so long as the people are faithful, too. Faithfulness for national security. Second Isaiah is decidedly different. There is no longer a righteous king; instead, the entirety of the

nation is all together to be a single united holy people. That's one perspective of Second Isaiah, not a king but a holy people. Another is that Second Isaiah is unusually filled with feminine images for God, God the mother dandling the people on her knee, sustaining the people at her breast, inscribing the people on her hands. That's another prophetic perspective of Second Isaiah. God is no longer a heavenly version of an earthly male monarch, but a heavenly embodiment of a whole people, women as well as men.

Most notably, Second Isaiah offers a perspective that would have been startling and radical in its day — there is only one God. Now don't get me wrong, the people of Israel had long believed that they were to worship only one God. They were not to worship Marduk of Babylon or Ashur of Assyria, that's clear, but before Second Isaiah there wasn't a claim that those gods didn't exist. In the Ancient Near East, the clash of nations was viewed also as the clash of gods. If Babylon conquered Assyria, that showed that the god Marduk has bested the god Ashur. Second Isaiah makes the then-radical claim that there was only one God over all the earth, and that was the God of Israel.

And what plans did this one God have for the enemies of the people of Israel? What would God do to Babylon who had brutalized and exiled the people? What state would the Babylonians find themselves in once the one Almighty God turned Her attention to writing wrongs and paying back grievances?

God would be their God, too. Loving and embracing and welcoming all people. This is what is imagined and promised — a voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rocky places plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

This is the hope that we see in Second Isaiah, the prophetic perspective that could only come from a people made to live for long days in strange and foreign climes, amid tumult and trial and upheaval and fear. There is only one God, and She is the beneficent creator of all — Babylonians as well as Judeans, Samaritans as well as Israelites.

The small hope for a righteous king to protect the people has been replaced by the grand vision of a holy people doing what is needed to care for one another. The small imagination of a God who is like a male monarch writ large has been replaced by the grand vision of a God who is too like a woman as well as like a man and encapsulated in no one expression of humanity but reflected best by the diversity of our bodies each

made in God's image. The small hope of one god scrabbling for supremacy among a host of gods just as nations scrabbled for supremacy among a host of nations has been replaced by the grand vision of God who embraces all of humanity, just as one day we pray all will be one, embracing one another as God embraces us.

Here in but a few words beginning Comfort, Comfort O my people, tell of peace, thus says our God, here we see the dearest hopes that we await in Christmas. Our lives transformed into examples of inextinguishable hope, our world transformed into a place of kinship and love, our spirits caught up into great mystery and the world remade into a place of peace. This is the hope we await at Christmas, a hope so grand that it is a little embarrassing, a little childish. But hope for a world transformed is not something we should ever grow out of. Rather, as our faith in God grows, our hope ought to grow with it, because we must remember what we are preparing. What we have been told to prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rocky places plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, that all people might see it together, that all people might see it together, that all people might see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

May it be so. Amen.